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SUBJECT: WILL THE YOUNGER GENERATIONS ELECT THE NEXT KOREAN
PRESIDENT?

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: Historically, regionalism has played an important role in Korean presidential elections. But in 2002, young voters successfully mobilized and helped Roh Moo-hyun edge out Lee Hoi-chang by a 2.2 percent margin. The media had a frenzy touting the "youth revolution," and the data seems to back that up. Upon closer analysis of regional voting statistics, young voters appeared to be less influenced by regional tendencies than the older voters. In addition, the technology-aided mobilization practices that younger voters used in 2002 have become the norm for elections. But the next presidential election in December 2007 will be the true test of whether the "youth revolution" was indeed a revolution. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Regionalism in South Korea -- particularly in the southwest (Honam) and southeast (Yeongnam) -- is notorious; voters not only choose their hometown candidates, but they often vote against candidates from the rival region. This was one reason why Kim Young-sam (Yeongnam) and Kim Dae-jung (Honam) publicly pledged not to run against each other in the 1987 presidential elections, because they knew their regions would split the opposition voters. (NOTE: Despite their promise, they ran against each other anyway, and their regions voted exactly as expected -- which gave ruling party candidate Roh Tae-woo the presidency. END NOTE.) However, after the impact the younger generations made on the 2002 presidential elections, the press speculated that Koreans were starting to vote more along generational lines than strictly regional ones.

DEFINING THE GENERATIONS

¶3. (U) The Korean War was the event that defined today's older generation in Korea. Ideologically, those who were old enough to remember the Korean War tend to be strongly anti-Communist and staunchly pro-American. They also tend to view North Koreans as enemies and hold strong opinions about how to deal with the North Korean regime. Politically and socially, this generation is conservative. Economically, those over 50 tend to subscribe to the "growth first" ideology, which prioritized economic growth over everything else, including human rights. Demographically, those aged 50 and older make up 24 percent of the population (11,387,000 people), per November 2005 census figures released by the National Statistics Office.

¶4. (U) Much has been written about Korea's 386 Generation:

those who are in their 30s, went to college in the 80s, and were born in the 60s. (NOTE: This moniker first appeared in the 1990s, so most people of this are now in their 40s. END NOTE.) The two defining events for this generation were the Gwangju Massacre and the democratic movement in the 1980s. Although young at the time, this generation experienced the Park Chung-hee authoritarian regime in the 1960s and 1970s, then demonstrated against associated military regimes in the 1980s. The student demonstrators also urged immediate reunification with North Korea and often joined forces in solidarity with the labor unions. Ideologically, the 386 Generation is characterized by being anti-American and sometimes pro-North Korean; it rejects traditional models of power and politics, such as old-school networking. Politically, this generation is the most progressive and active. Economically, it does not embrace the growth first ideology like those over 50; it prioritizes human rights over economic growth. Demographically, those in their 30s and 40s are a big group, representing 34 percent of the population.

15. (U) Many of the 386 Generation have moved into positions where they can influence politics or public opinion. A few, such as prominent 386 leader Im Jong-seok, are now lawmakers. President Roh, who defended many student demonstrators during the 1980s, has surrounded himself with advisors who were demonstrators as students. Sociology professor Park Kyung-tae of Sungkonghoe University told poloff that many 386ers also became journalists and TV news producers. Their positions of influence dictate the sociopolitical conversations and explain some of the more progressive story topics.

16. (U) The 20-something generation (or Generation-C) is the first Korean generation with no mature memory of an authoritarian regime. Generation C grew up after Korea became democratized and takes free press for granted. As a result, they are sometimes apathetic politically. This generation is also called Generation C because they are so wired. (NOTE: the "C" can stand for cyber, computer, or community. END NOTE.) Although not an event per se, the Internet boom defines this generation above all else. Young Koreans embraced social-networking blog sites (such as Cyworld, comparable to MySpace or Facebook and recently introduced in the U.S.) much earlier than their counterparts in the U.S., thanks in part to the proliferation of broadband Internet (NOTE: Nearly 80 percent of Korean households have high-speed, broadband Internet, according to Ministry of Information and Communication June 2006 data. END NOTE.)

17. (U) Ideologically, Generation C tends to be more conservative than the 386 Generation, but resists being identified with a particular ideology. Generation C cannot be identified as anti-American (although many participated in anti-American demonstrations after two young schoolgirls were accidentally killed by USFK soldiers in 2002). They are not unquestioningly anti-North Korean like the older generation, nor as pro-North Korean as the 386. Economically, this generation takes a developed society for granted. However, because it experienced the Asian financial crisis of the late 90s, it has a complicated view of money, at times careless about consumerism and conservative about saving. Those in their 20s are also characterized as being self-centered and individualistic, as opposed to the other generations' tendency toward more socially responsible outlook. Demographically, those in their 20s make up 15.5 percent of the population, or 7,334,000 potential voters. Those who are currently 15-19 represent 6.5 percent of the population; those in this group who will turn 19 before the December 2007 election will be able to vote.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO MOBILIZE YOUNG VOTERS

18. (U) Generation C and the 386 Generation were credited with electing Roh Moo-hyun as president. This is due in part to their mastery of Internet and cell phone technology to mobilize voters. When former candidate Chung Mong-jun

withdrew support of Roh the night before the election, people posted messages on Web sites and sent cell phone text messages urging people to maintain support for Roh. This mobilized youngsters to vote and also changed the minds of people who had been planning on voting for the Democratic Labor Party candidate, Kwon Young-ghil. Roh ended up defeating Lee Hoi-chang by a mere 2.2% margin, or 570,980 votes. The Internet was also credited with politicizing people who would otherwise be apathetic, because "netizens" are exposed more frequently to political Web sites.

¶9. (U) One media tool in particular that helped facilitate the mobilization was OhmyNews, an online news site where netizen reporters can write their own articles, which are then fact-checked by staff before posting. This Web site was created by 386er Oh Yeon-ho, who has said, "My generation, the 386 generation, were (sic) in the streets fighting in the 80s against the military dictatorship. Now, 20 years later, we are combat-ready with our Internet." OhmyNews is where many netizens submitted articles urging people to get out the vote.

¶10. (U) After the 2002 election, the media widely reported that "generationalism" had the potential to overcome regionalism in Korean politics. A Joong-Ang Ilbo survey conducted in late 2002 found that 48.8 percent of those in their 20s and 30s had voted for Roh for the sake of a "replacement of generations" or "generational transfer." Critics have remarked that the media may have fabricated a myth of generational conflict where none actually existed.

GENERATION VS. REGION

¶11. (U) Analyzing national election results by age, the generations appear to have voted along their ideological and political tendencies. The majority of people in their 20s (62 percent) and 30s (60.2 percent) voted for Roh, while the majority of people in their 40s (50.8 percent) and 50s (65.5 percent) voted for Lee.

¶12. (U) Examining the 2002 election results by region, one sees that the southwest (Honam) and southeast (Yeongnam) voted almost exactly as they did in the 1997 presidential elections. According to Gallup Korea data, in 2002, 93.2 percent of voters in Honam voted for Roh, which is nearly identical to the 94.4 percent of Honam voters who voted for Kim Dae-jung in 1997. In 2002, 75.5 percent of people in Yeongnam voted for Lee Hoi-chang, compared with 66.9 percent who voted for him in 1997. (NOTE: This does not include votes for Rhee In-je, a former GNP candidate. After he lost in the primaries, he formed a new political party to run separately, so most of his votes would have gone to Lee if Rhee didn't run. END NOTE.)

¶13. (U) However, it is noteworthy that younger voters in the Yeongnam region voted closer to generational lines than regional ones in 2002: only 61.1 percent of people in their 20s and 52.1 percent of voters in their 30s voted for Lee (compared to 75.5 percent for Lee overall and 90.1 percent for those aged 50). So it appears that younger voters were less influenced by their region's tendencies than older voters. Demographically, Honam has 5,021,548 people and Yeongnam has 12,701,303 people, representing 10.6 percent and 26.9 percent respectively of the entire population.

OUTLOOK FOR 2007 PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

¶14. (U) Professor Kim characterized the current voter mood among those in their 20s and 30s as "confused," due to the failure of the Roh Administration to achieve real reform. Asked to speculate on how voters would react to Park Geun-hye as a presidential candidate, Professor Kim opined that she could win Generation C's vote if she continues to play good "image" politics. Younger voters react emotionally, not necessarily rationally, he explained. They will ignore her father's authoritarian regime and focus on the economic

miracle he achieved in Korea. If Park and Lee Myung-bak were to run against each other, he predicted that the older generation would split the vote between Park, out of nostalgia for the "good old days," and Lee, who it perceived as having stronger will than Park.

¶15. (U) Lessons from the 2002 election have been well-digested. Two in particular are noteworthy. First, some of the technology-aided mobilization tactics from the 2002 elections have been institutionalized and will likely become standard practice for the 2007 elections, particularly as more tech-savvy young Koreans come to voting age. Second, politicians will continue to court the younger generation -- not only because they are the largest group demographically, but also because of the impact they made in 2002. The political parties have already embraced some of the technology tactics that the younger generation used in the 2002 elections in the local and by-elections.

COMMENT

¶16. (U) The younger generations impacted the 2002 presidential election more than any other election. Although the media may have exaggerated stories about the youth revolution and the generational differences in the 2002 elections, there seems to have been a legitimate trend of young voters voting along generational, rather than regional, lines.

VERSHBOW